

Rep. Bruce Braley, D-Iowa, is introducing legislation to help improve mental health care and other services that veterans receive in Department of Veterans Affairs-administered facilities.

"The VA is facing an increased and unprecedented demand for medical services today as aging World War II, Korean War and Vietnam War veterans require more medical care, and thousands of veterans are returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan with serious physical and mental health needs," Braley said Thursday in Dubuque.

The congressman plans to formally introduce the legislation on Tuesday, Feb. 23, the 65th anniversary of the day his father, Byard, a U.S. Marine, landed on Iwo Jima -- a small island in the Pacific and the site of one of the most savage and celebrated battles in Marine Corps history.

Byard joined the Marines Corps at age 17; at age 18, Byard found himself landing on Iwo Jima (now named Iwo To -- the island's name before the war).

Byard died nearly 30 years ago, and his son never interviewed him about the war.

Long after Byard died, Bruce Braley obtained his service record and traced every ship Byard sailed on from San Diego to Iwo Jima and back. Byard and other Marines were transported to Iwo Jima by LST 808 (later sunk off Okinawa by enemy action). Bruce also learned of an LST 808 survivors' reunion group. He called a contact number and talked to a man in Decatur, Ill.

"I explained who I was and what I was doing, and he started crying," Braley said. "He said, 'We were just a bunch of dumb, young Navy sailors and we gave those Marines such a hard time on the ship before we dropped them off. We had no idea how few of them were coming home.'"

"To me, it starts to personalize why we owe so much to our veterans and why services,

particularly mental health services for returning veterans who served in combat, are so important -- especially now," Braley said. "If you look at the type of combat our Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are exposed to -- even though they are completely different theaters, it's very similar to Iwo Jima where the enemy was buried underground in tunnels and caves."

Braley concluded a swing through the state this week discussing veterans' health care issues by touring Dubuque's Department of Veterans Affairs outpatient clinic located at Mercy Medical Center-Dubuque.